DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 988 HE 028 569

AUTHOR Cash, R. William
TITLE Assessing a Writing-across-the-Curriculum Program with a Survey of Recent Graduates. AIR 1995 Annual Forum Paper.
PUB DATE May 95
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (35th, Boston, MA, May 28-31, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Graduates; *Education Work Relationship; Graduate Surveys; Higher Education; *Institutional Research; *Job Skills; Program Evaluation; Student Attitudes; *Writing Across the Curriculum; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum; *Saint Marys College IN

ABSTRACT

The effects of a writing-across-the-curriculum program on graduates 2 to 9 years after program completion at Saint Mary's College (Indiana) were studied. A survey of 656 graduates (over one-third of the sample) from 8 graduating classes gathered data regarding the types of writing being utilized by the graduates, and the effectiveness of their writing curriculum in preparing them for their present roles. Findings included: nearly half the respondents indicated that their writing ability was a factor in obtaining their present job, and on average they spent nearly a fourth of their work week in writing tasks; among the respondents who undertook graduate studies, over a fourth had authored or co-authored a publication and a fourth had written grant proposals; and respondents reported they also spent time each week writing for pleasure. Questions about the college's writing program concerned: the types of writing experiences that helped the students prepare for writing after graduation; the frequency of specific guidelines being provided for writing assignments; the extent that revision was emphasized; the extent feedback on writing was provided; how many papers over and under 10 pages were written; and the types of teaching methods which were used in class. (Contains 11 references.) (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 386 988

ASSESSING A WRITING-ACROSS-THE-CURRICULUM PROGRAM WITH A SURVEY OF RECENT GRADUATES

R. William Cash
Director
Records, Research, and Assessment
Union College
3800 South 48th Street
Lincoln, NE 68506
(402) 486-2509

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

AIR

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Presented at
Association for Institutional Research Annual Forum
Boston, Massachusetts
May 31, 1995

HE 028 569

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

for Management Research, Policy Analysis, and Planning

This paper was presented at the Thirty-Fifth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Boston Sheraton Hotel & Towers, Boston, Massacusetts, May 28-31, 1995. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Jean Endo
Editor
AIR Forum Publications

ASSESSING A WRITING-ACROSS-THE-CURRICULUM PROGRAM WITH A SURVEY OF RECENT GRADUATES

ABSTRACT

When a writing-across-the-curriculum program has been in existence for over a decade, it is possible to gather information regarding the program's effectiveness from graduates in the workplace and in graduate/professional schools. This paper describes one such effort, using a survey of 2,000 graduates from eight graduating classes to gather data regarding the types of writing being utilized by the graduates, and the effectiveness of their writing curriculum in preparing them for their present roles. Institutional researchers will find this paper useful where such programs are already in place or are being contemplated.

ASSESSING A WRITING-ACROSS-THE-CURRICULUM PROGRAM WITH A SURVEY OF RECENT GRADUATES

Introduction

Despite the growth in the number of colleges and universities establishing writing-across-the-curriculum programs, and the development of professional literature supporting these initiatives, there has not been much sharing of a methodology to evaluate the long-term effect of these writing programs. With their growing popularity, there is also an increasing need to assess these programs to determine the manner in which students have benefited from the program and to ascertain areas in which the programs need to be strengthened.

The literature of program review and assessment (eg., Ewell, 1988; Kinnick, 1985; Wilson, 1987) emphasizes the importance of evaluation of institutional effectiveness at the program level. Specifically, McLeod and Soven (1991) urge directors of writing programs to build evaluation into their program. Multiple measures, including student surveys, are recommended. Others who provide suggestions for such evaluations include Davis, Scriven, and Thomas (1987), Fulwiler (1984 & 1988), White (1985 & 1989), Witte and Faigley (1983), and Young and Fulwiler (1986).

This paper shares the methodology and general results of a survey which assessed the effects of a writing-across-the-curriculum program on graduates two to nine years after program completion at Saint Mary's College (Indiana). A

Catholic women's college, Saint Mary's is a competitive, highly-ranked, comprehensive college in the liberal arts tradition. The College was among the first to incorporate the writing-across-the-curriculum program, beginning in the early 1970s, and its program was cited in the 1988 *US News* (26 Oct 1987) for the way the college placed emphasis on developing its students' communication skills. Program faculty have been invited to describe this program on many other campuses throughout the years.

Initially, the Writing Program was directed from within the English department; however, in the past decade it has more widely involved faculty across the disciplines. Since the late 1980s, students have been required to meet two writing requirements as part of their graduation requirements. As freshmen, they take at least one course from the general education core designated as a writing class, developing a writing portfolio of at least three required pieces reviewed by a cross-disciplinary reading committee. Approval of this portfolio earns them their "Basic W". An "Advanced W" is earned during the senior year, with criteria varying among the majors. Again, this frequently is a portfolio review of one to four pieces, evaluated by faculty members within the respective department. The initiation of the "Advanced W" requirement was the last modification to this program's evolution.

Presently, oversight of the Writing Program rotates among a number of faculty, with different co-directors selected each semester. Often one of these co-directors is someone who has co-directed the program in the past, providing

continuity among the leadership. A monthly workshop open to all college faculty provides opportunity to present and discuss a wide range of topics relating to writing.

A wealth of anecdotal information regarding the usefulness and success of the Writing Program has filtered back to the faculty since the program had been in effect, but no formal evaluation had ever been made of the program. A faculty committee consisting of several veteran writing faculty, including some with psychometric and survey design experience, was assigned the task of working with the Saint Mary's institutional researcher to develop a research methodology for assessing the program. It was quickly determined that a true experimental design comparing the post-baccalaureate experience of the Writing Program graduates at Saint Mary's with matched peers from one or more other colleges where there was no writing program would be virtually impossible to administer. Hence, the resulting plan was to gather descriptive information in a survey of eight consecutive and representative graduating classes overlapping the last major revision in the program's requirements.

A one-page survey (front and back, see Appendix A) was developed by this group of writing instructors and the institutional researcher. The instrument was divided into two major sections: the first part focused on the assessment of writing since graduation (in the workplace, in graduate/professional school, and for pleasure); the second assessed their undergraduate writing experience—the nature of their writing instruction and the extent to which writing pervaded the curriculum.

In gathering information regarding the writing activities in which respondents had engaged since graduation, somewhat parallel information was sought. What types of writing were they doing? Was their writing ability recognized by those with whom they associated? How much time did they spend in writing-related activities? And which of the writing experiences at the college had helped prepare them for their writing activities?

As the committee drafted this survey, it continued to solicit feedback regarding the appropriateness of the items and the inclusiveness of as many evaluative aspects of the program from the writing faculty. This also gave widespread ownership of the survey and research design to the writing faculty.

Methodology

The survey was mailed to a randomly-selected sample of 2,000 graduates from the classes of 1985 through 1992 (250 in each of the eight classes), along with a cover letter from the chief academic officer and a postpaid business reply envelope. A label indicating the subject's graduating year, degree, major(s), and address was affixed to each form. The classes were selected because the Writing Program had undergone its last change in the mid-point of this time period wihle these students had been enrolled at Saint Mary's.

Responses were received from over a third of the sample, and appear to be a good representation of the population (see Table 1). There was a slight over-representation from the two most recent classes; ironically, these classes have the

Table 1

Response rate of Writing Program Survey—by class

	Total in class	No. in survey	% of sample	No. resp.	% of entire class	% of class sample	% of total resp.
Class of 1985	391	200	12.5%	73	18.7%	36.5%	11.1%
Class of 1986	383	200	12.5%	76	19.8%	38.0%	11.6%
Class of 1987	370	200	12.5%	80	21.6%	40.0%	12.2%
Class of 1988	385	200	12.5%	76	19.7%	38.0%	11.6%
Class of 1989	391	200	12.5%	82	21.0%	41.0%	12.5%
Class of 1990	392	200	12.5%	77	19.6%	38.5%	11.7%
Class of 1991	436	200	12.5%	93	21.3%	46.5%	14.2%
Class of 1992	411	200	12.5%	99	24.1%	49.5%	15.1%
Total	3,159	1,600	100.0%	656	20.8%	41.0%	100.0%

shortest post-baccalaureate experience and would have the least amount of activity to report and the least experience to evaluate. Table 2 shows the response rate by major, showing more variation among the subgroups. Over a fourth of the education majors responded to the survey, while fewer than a sixth of the humanistic studies, psychology, philosophy, and communication/theatre majors responded.

The quantifiable responses were analyzed using SPSS; writing faculty developed a coding scheme to categorize subjective responses, and these were

Table 2

Response rate of Writing Program Survey—by major

	Total Graduates	Number of Respondents	Resp Rate
Art	111	21	18.9%
Biology	155	34	21.9%
Business	755	160	21.2%
Chemistry	58	13	22.4%
Communication/Theatre	386	64	16.6%
Economics	93	21	22.6%
Education	282	79	28.0%
English	402	80	19.9%
History	207	38	18.4%
Humanistic Studies	167	26	15.6%
Mathematics	127	28	22.0%
Modern Language	115	23	20.0%
Nursing	230	46	20.0%
Philosophy	61	10	16.4%
Political Science	261	61	23.4%
Psychology	245	39	15.9%
Sociology/Social Work	150	27	18.0%
Other	41	8	19.5%

also included in the SPSS analysis. In a separate data file, the description of each respondent's "most instructional writing experience" was entered along with demographic identifiers for subgroup analyses.

Results

Some of the results from the Writing in the Workplace section are shown in Table 3. Nearly half (47.9 percent) of the respondents indicated that their writing ability was considered as a factor in their obtaining their present position, and on

Table 3

Writing in the Workplace, Graduate/Professional Schools, and for Pleasure

Writing in the Workplace

Was your writing ability considered as a factor in your obtaining your present position?

	Number	Percent
Yes	291	47.9%
No	316	52.1%
Not working	49	

On average, about how many hours per week do you spend in work-related writing tasks?

Mean	11.47 hrs/week (Std Dev 10.52)
Median	8.00 hrs/week
Range	0 to 60 hrs/week

Writing in Graduate/Professional Schools

How many publications have you authored or co-authored?

Mean	1.49 (Std Dev 8.55)
Median	less than 1
Range	0 to 10

How many grant proposals have you written or helped write?

Mean	.97 (Std Dev 4.42)
Median	Less than 1
Range	0 to 50

About how many hours per week do you spend writing?

Mean	8.8 hrs/week (Std Dev 11.07)
Median	5 hrs/week
Range	0 to 93

Writing for Pleasure

About how many hours per week do you write for pleasure?

Mean	2.43 hrs/week (Std Dev 2.31)
Median	2 hrs/week
Range	0 to 30

Do friends and family solicit your help in their writing tasks because they think you are a good writer?

	Number	Percent
Yes	436	70.8%
No	180	29.2%
No response	40	

average these respondents spend nearly a fourth of their work week (median of 8 hours, mean of 11.47 hours) in writing tasks.

There were 286 respondents who answered questions related to graduate/ professional schools, and their results are also shown in Table 3. There appears to be a fair amount of scholarly writing activity by these students. Over a fourth had authored or co-authored a publication, and a sixth had done so two or more times. Similar evidence is found for writing grant proposals, with a fourth having done this at least once. Most of these respondents spend around five to eight hours writing each week.

Respondents also spend time each week writing for pleasure (see also in Table 3), although this time is often limited to two or three hours weekly. To a wide extent (in more than 70 percent of the cases), friends and family solicit respondents' help in their writing tasks because they are perceived as being good writers. Whether these results are typical or not, there is evidence that Saint Mary's graduates are still utilizing the writing skills they honed while in college.

The evaluation of the Writing Program also included indicating on parallel series of writing experiences those which may have helped the students prepare for the variety of writing they would do after graduation. These are shown in Table 4. The experience cited most often for preparing respondents for writing in the workplace and writing in school were the papers written for classes in their major, followed by the "Basic W", the senior comprehensive (in many cases this consists of a major research paper), the papers written for classes in their minor, and the

Table 4

Which writing experiences at Saint Mary's helped prepare you?

	Writing in the Workplace	Writing in School	Writing for Pleasure
Basic W	405	184	329
Papers written in courses in your major	478	238	263
Papers written in courses in your minor	228	110	147
Advanced W	162	73	89
Senior comprehensive	235	131	117
Other	108	36	91
None	32	3	112

"Advanced W". The lower rating of the latter two experiences is likely due to the fact that many students at Saint Mary's do not graduate with minors, and the "Advanced W" was not required of at least half of the survey population. A different ranking of these experiences in terms of their preparation for personal pleasure writing swapped the importance of the top two reasons cited for the workplace and school, with the "Basic W" being cited most often as a preparation for personal pleasure writing. The senior comprehensive also dropped in ranking, and there was a higher number of respondents indicating that none of the writing experiences at Saint Mary's helped prepare them for this writing, or they cited other experiences.

The survey also gathered further information regarding these writing experiences, and these results are shown in Table 5. Over two-thirds (68.6

Table 5

Writing experiences at Saint Mary's College

To what extent did you instructors provide specific guidelines for their writing assignments?	
Never	0.8%
Sometimes	30.6%
Usually	50.8%
Always	17.8%
To what extent did your instructors emphasize revision?	
Never	7.3%
Sometimes	33.1%
Usually	31.6%
Always	28.0%
To what extent did your instructors provide specific feedback on your writing before the end of the semester?	
Never	4.1%
Sometimes	24.3%
Usually	37.0%
Always	34.6%
About how many long (10 or more pages) papers did you write?	
Median	5 papers
Mean	8.37 (Std Dev 7.41)
Range	0 to 72
About how many short (fewer than 10 pages) papers did you write?	
Median	15 papers
Mean	23.71 (Std Dev 15.33)
Range	0 to 100

percent) of the instructors "usually" or "always" provided specific guidelines for their writing assignments, and nearly all the rest "sometimes" did so. Well over half (59.6 percent) of the instructors also emphasized revisions, and even more (71.6 percent) provided specific feedback on their writing during the course of the

Table 6

Evaluation of Writing Experiences at Saint Mary's College

How did your teachers provide writing instruction? (check all that apply)

Comments written on paper	594
Written guidelines	490
Suggestions during revision	484
Lecture in class	431
Peer feedback	237
Other	37

In what areas could you have used more instruction? (check all that apply)

Professional format	302
Grammar/style	270
Personal/expressive writing	204
Technical reports	191
Library work	121
Narrative writing	81
Other	26

I learned the most about writing when the assignment was . . .

Mean		1....2....3....4....5....6....7	
4.11	short	|....|....|....|x...|....|....|	long
4.42	assigned topic	|....|....|....|.x..|....|....|	you selected topic
2.29	draft revision	|....|x...|....|....|....|....|	no drafts required
3.19	in major	|....|....|x...|....|....|....|	not in major
3.65	in minor	|....|....|..x.|....|....|....|	not in minor
5.50	in-class assgnmt	|....|....|....|....|..x.|....|	take-home assgnmt
	with prior class		without prior class
2.94	discussion of topic	|....|....x....|....|....|....|	discussions of topic

class.

The respondents indicated they had to write several (generally between five and eight) long papers of ten or more pages, and even more often (15 to 25 times) were required to write a shorter paper.

Finally, the survey asked respondents to indicate their recollection of how writing instruction was provided in class, and the areas in which they now feel they could have used more instruction. These results are shown in Table 6.

The method utilized by teachers in providing writing instruction is listed in ranked order. The method utilized most often was comments written on the paper. Written guidelines were also widely used, as were suggestions during the revision process and class lectures. Utilized less frequently (but still for more than a third of the respondents) was peer feedback.

Wider experience in using professional format, and the need for sharpening grammar and style skills were cited most often as the areas where the respondents felt they could have used more instruction. Specialized writing, such as technical reports and personal/expressive writing, were also cited by nearly a third of the respondents.

The characteristics of the learning situation where respondents learned the most about writing were take-home assignments that included draft revisions with prior class discussion of the topic. Of the seven paired dichotomies, the results for these three characteristics were the furthest from the center of the seven-point semantic-differential-type scale. Typically these experiences were in courses related to the students' majors. Slight preferences were stated for papers with writer-selected topics (as opposed to teacher-assigned topics), papers assigned in classes related to the students' minor (as opposed to not being in the minor), and longer papers.

As the faculty reviewed the results of this survey, they noted a couple of items where the responses were ambiguous and difficult to explain. The finding that many respondents wished they could have had more instruction in grammar/ style surprised the faculty, but they were at a loss from the responses that were made as to whether this need was for more grammar instruction or style instruction, or whether something else was being communicated by the respondents. The faculty would like to see further investigation to clarify this area.

It was also noted in the analysis of the results grouped by the respondents' major that the science majors tended to report having written fewer papers in their studies at Saint Mary's. Apparently these respondents were not including in their tallies the many written laboratory reports they had completed. Future studies might indicate parenthetically the types of assignments typically included in the characterization of long and short papers.

Discussion

The fact that there is no comparative information for this survey makes it difficult to ascertain whether or not these results are typical for all college graduates, or whether the Writing Program indeed made a difference in the post-baccalaureate experience of Saint Mary's graduates. Yet, there is ample evidence that writing remains an important part of these graduates' lives, and there is a wealth of evidence related to the types of writing being done in the data that was not reported in this paper. This information, particularly, will be helpful to the

Writing Program faculty as they develop real-life assignments to better prepare current and future students for life after college.

The evidence presented also gives an indication of the writing experiences that have been most effective in preparing the graduates for their present situations, and this can assist the faculty in further shaping these experiences to be most helpful. Analysis of these results by the graduation year of the respondent can also tell whether the later implementation of the "Advanced W" was perceived as being more helpful to those students who experienced this particular activity.

The survey provides clear evidence that the Writing Program pervades the entire curriculum at Saint Mary's, as it appears only a minuscule proportion of faculty never utilize writing-related activities. The large number of assigned papers (an average of 30 short and long papers per respondent) indicates there are indeed few classes without writing assignments.

The respondents also provided feedback regarding the areas in which they could have used more instruction, and the Writing Faculty will give attention to these recommendations.

Conclusions

Can a survey of a writing-across-the-curriculum program provide evidence usable in assessing the academic program of a college or university? The evidence presented here affirms the usefulness of such a survey, and gives some indication of the kinds of questions that can be asked in this type of survey.

Clearly, comparative data from similar and different types of schools would provide a better assessment, and it is hoped that as writing-across-the-curriculum program become more widespread, collaborative evaluations involving the sharing of these types of results will yield comparable information.

The information gathered with this survey has proven quite valuable at Saint Mary's College in identifying the type of writing activities experienced by their graduates after leaving college, and also in pinpointing areas where the program can be strengthened.

It is hoped the results presented here can contribute in a small way to the growing body of research on the effect of writing-across-the-curriculum programs. Institutional researchers from campuses incorporating this type of writing program, and those where this curricular innovation is being contemplated, can benefit from the information presented and the recommendations suggested in this paper.

Bibliography

Davis, B., Scriven, M., & Thomas, S. (1987). *The evaluation of composition instruction*. New York: Teachers College.

Ewell, P. T. (1987). Establishing a campus-based assessment program. In D. F. Halpern (Issue Ed.), Student outcomes assessment: What institutions stand to gain. *New directions in higher education* (No. 59, pp. 9-24). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Fulwiler, T. (1984). How well does writing across the curriculum work? *College English*, 46, 113-125.

Fulwiler, T. (1988). Evaluating writing across the curriculum programs. In S. H. McLeod (Ed.), *Strengthening programs for writing across the curriculum*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kinnick, M. K. Increasing the use of student outcomes information. In P. T. Ewell (Issue Ed.), Assessing educational outcomes. *New directions for institutional research* (No. 47, pp. 93-109). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

McLeod, S. H., & Soven, M. (1991). What do you need to start—and sustain—a writing-across-the-curriculum program? *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 15, (Nos. 1-2), 25-33

White, E. (1985). *Teaching and assessing writing*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

White, E. (1989). *Developing successful college writing programs*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Wilson, R. F. (1987). Program evaluation in higher education. In J. A. Muffo & G. W. McLaughlin (Eds.), *A primer on institutional research*, (pp. 45-56). Tallahassee, FL: The Association for Institutional Research.

Witte, S. P., & Faigley, L. (1983). *Evaluating college writing programs*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.

Young, A., & Fulwiler, T. (1986). *Writing across the disciplines: Research into practice*. Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook.